Meaningful Responses to Literature

by Madeline Kovarik

With the right instructional strategies, teachers can promote reading achievement.

If students were as engaged in reading as they are in video games, television, and sports, the world would be rife with proficient readers. Using a variety of instructional strategies, teachers can make the reading experience more meaningful, increase comprehension, and build proficiency. Mastering cognitive skills can change student reading from a chore to an enriching experience.

Good readers have learned the cognitive skills that increase reading comprehension. First, they identify the purpose for reading the story or passage. Second, they recognize instances when the story becomes unclear and take appropriate steps for clarification. In addition, proficient readers activate prior knowledge before, during, and after reading the text; identify the main idea or theme; ask questions internally and externally; create sensory images; draw inferences; retell and synthesize; and seek to rectify conceptual misconceptions (Keene and Zimmermann 1997).

To assist the development and application of these skills and to increase reading proficiency, teachers should

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integrate a variety of responses to literature in their classrooms. This article presents some instructional strategies that effectively promote reading achievement.

Journals

Journals, which have become a regular part of the school day in many classrooms, may be applied as an effective instructional technique to promote student response to literature. Using journals with a story prompt is one method of practicing writing semantics, stimulating creativity, and increasing vocabulary.

Journal writing as a literature response begins by modeling the process before the students write independently. To model the experience, the teacher uses a book or story that the class has read and focuses on the following areas: characterization, the effect of the story on the reader, words and phrases to research, and questions generated by the reading. The teacher demonstrates how students should use sticky notes while reading to mark interesting passages to address in their journals. The teacher also models the use of descriptive words (Hill, Johnson, and Noe 1995) and constructs word walls, with tips such as "*said* is dead" and preferred alternatives for students to use in place of general words and phrases such as *pretty* and *very good*.

The teacher continues modeling the process throughout journal development and introduces additional skills commensurate with the depth and quality of the students' responses. Strategies for shaping journal responses include: changing the point of view, focusing on the theme or issue, generating connections to the real world or personal experiences, rewriting the author's text in a different genre, extending the experience of the main character to a new situation, and connecting the text to another story or passage (Mitchell 2002).

Five basic types of journals are effective for responding to literature. The first, a **diary,** allows students to capture their ongoing thoughts and personal reactions to the literature. Kept private, a diary serves as a vehicle for students to express themselves without reservation. The writing is not shared unless the student gives permission (Tierney and Readance 2000).

The second type of journal is the **response journal,** in which students reflect on what they have read, formulate questions, ponder future events, or react to current events in the story. This vehicle allows readers to relate the reading to their personal experiences (Richek et al. 2002). Another method of response journaling is to have the students record the number of pages read during that session, describe the setting for those pages, identify the highlighted characters (including their reaction to new characters that have been introduced), and compose a short one- to two-sentence summary of the plot. If students are focusing on a particular literary device, such as irony or flashback, they also can provide an example from the text (Bailey 2003). Another strategy is to allow the student to assume the personality of the story character and write "a day in the life" of that character supported by events from the story. For longer novels, the entry can focus on several chapters or an incident that occurred in the story (Johnson and Louis 1987). Students can share this journal with the teacher or keep it private.

The third type of journal is the **dialogue journal**, which is an ongoing, open communication between the student and teacher, or student and peer. The student records thoughts and reflections on the text's material. In written form, this communication allows the student to express emotions and thoughts that he or she might not be willing to share orally. The role of the teacher is to respond with honesty and sincerity by providing remarks, ideas, suggestions, and reactions. The teacher must not assume a judgmental role, but rather focus on encouraging the student (Tierney and Readance 2000). Through dialogue with the student, the teacher offers suggestions that enhance the reader's understanding of the story, corrects misunderstandings, provides alternative viewpoints, and shares mutual perspectives (Richek et al. 2002).

The fourth type of journal is the **double-entry journal.** The student writes ideas concerning the text on one half of the journal page and reactions on the other half. This journal can be private or shared with others.

The last basic form of journal is the **learning log,** in which the student records what is learned throughout the story (Cooper 2000). When using a learning log, students can use the KNIT strategy: **K**ey ideas (What is happening? What concepts or conflicts have been introduced?); **N**ext (What do students predict will happen next?); **I**nsights (What isn't clear in the story? What "aha" moments have occurred?); and Think (**T**hink about supporting examples or contrasting evidence.).

Journals for expository texts are similar to those used for narrative literature or content-area instruction. For expository texts, however, the teacher models two additional writing techniques. First, the teacher demonstrates how students should write about the most important thing they learned or ask clarifying questions (Giacobbe 1986). From this writing, the teacher

can assess concepts learned as well as shed light on misunderstandings. Second, the teacher models the RAFT technique (Richek et al. 2002): **R**ole (the person, character, or object being discussed); **A**udience (who the author is addressing); **F**ormat (the style or type of writing); and **T**opic (the subject being discussed). The RAFT technique provides students with a scaffold for their journal entries.

Journaling allows readers to express how the literature has touched their lives and causes students to process the text on a higher level. Teachers can successfully implement this strategy in any curriculum area.

Book in a Day

Another response strategy, Book in a Day, can be a successful experience particularly for language-enriched students (ESOL) or lower-level readers who struggle to complete an entire book. The teacher begins by reading the first two chapters of a book to the entire class. Advanced students, however, may choose to read the chapters independently.

The teacher then divides the class into smaller reading groups and assigns each group one or more chapters of the book. The number of students in each group and the number of chapters assigned can be adjusted to meet the reading levels of the students. Each group meets to read and discuss only its assigned chapters and then prepares a brief (2–3 minute) summary. In addition, the group generates a list of questions concerning earlier chapters in the book and forms predictions about subsequent chapters. As each group presents its chapters to the entire class, all students work individually to create a title for that material and either draw a picture concerning an event in that section or write a summary of the material.

The Book in a Day strategy allows students to concentrate on only a few chapters of a book, reducing the load to a manageable level. Further, the technique allows students to experience an entire chapter book, which can be a daunting task for a challenged reader. For advanced students, the presentation to the class can be modified to include more specific criteria, such as creating a mandala (a symbolic graphic with multiple sections), a chapter quilt, or a mosaic, or writing and dramatizing two personal letters—one that a character might write to another, and the response.

Story Grid

A technique that allows students to brainstorm ideas while focusing on creative-writing skills is the story grid. The story grid forces students to use higher-order thinking skills to connect unrelated items or concepts into a cohesive story (Lazear 1991). Story grids, used as an independent technique or in response to reading, also foster creativity and help students to experience a content-based lesson that focuses on enhancing verbal and linguistic intelligence (Gardner 1993).

On the blackboard or a large sheet of paper, draw a grid (see figure 1). The grid can be any number of columns and rows, depending on how complex the story will become.

Students brainstorm, as a class, to identify potential main characters (using proper names) and other key story elements specified in the column headings. This process continues until all cells are completed. Next, groups of students randomly choose one entry from each column for their group. A student or the teacher rolls a die to choose items. For example, if the number two is rolled for the Main Character, the second suggestion in the Main Character column would be selected; a five in the Conflict column would signify the fifth suggestion in that column. Using the combination of items, students work in their cooperative groups to create a cohesive story that connects the selections; each group then presents its story to the class.

This technique can be modified to fit various subject areas by altering the column headings. Another variation is to have one member of each group begin to write the story individually and then, at a predetermined signal, pass the story to another person in the group to continue based on the grid selections.

Book in a Box

A strategy that gets readers involved with literature in a unique way is to have each student create a Book

Figure 1. Story Grid

Main Character	Sidekick or Friend	Bad Person or Villain	Conflict	Setting	Resolution or Ending

in a Box that focuses on a specific book or author, or on several books by the same author. Students can construct boxes or obtain empty, unused, fast-food or cookie boxes. The box should highlight the characters, setting, or conflicts in the book, or illuminate an author, and provide detailed information and fun activities. Grading is based on the depth of the activities, appearance, and selection of toys chosen to represent the literature.

A Book in a Box based on *Charlotte's Web* (White 1952), for example, might include a spider web on one side; following the threads of the web could spell out *some pig*, *terrific*, or *humble*. Another side might include a maze that leads Templeton, the rat, to the fair. A good source for user-friendly maze creation is *www.puzzlemaker.com*. The remaining sides might display a significant quote from the book and information about the author. Inside the box might be a small stuffed pig.

The students can present the boxes in class and then place them on display for classmates or others to appreciate. Having students respond to the literature in this manner fosters creativity and emphasizes the critical elements of the book.

Poetry

Providing students with access to multiple genres of literature—including poetry—is important for any language arts program. Poet Bruce Lansky (2006) recommended the following strategies to make poetry exciting for students:

- Locate and test poems that students will enjoy.
- Choose poems that children can relate to based on their personal experiences.
- Have students recite or perform poetry.
- Allow students to laugh and physically enjoy the poetry being read.
- Invite students to interact with the poetry while it is read—by acting it out or adding sound effects.
- Focus on the meaning of the poem.
- Invite guest performers—include parents and members of the school staff.
- Read poetry regularly!

Biopoems

A great opening for the beginning of the school year is to have students create and share Biopoems. A Biopoem is a succinct, structured poem that follows a simple format (see figure 2) and provides specific details about the life, personality, and emotions of a person or character. The key to successful composition of a Biopoem lies in choosing vivid, carefully selected words.

Figure 2. Biopoem Format

Line one: First name of person or character.
Line two: Four traits that describe your character.
Line three: Relative of . . .
Line four: Lover of . . . (list three things or people)
Line five: Who feels . . . (list three)
Line six: Who needs . . . (list three)
Line seven: Who fears . . . (list three)
Line eight: Who gives . . . (list three)
Line nine: Who would like to see . . . (list three)
Line ten: Resident of . . .
Line eleven: Last name of person or character.

At the beginning of the school year, these poems provide students with insights into their classmates and help them to identify with other students who have similar thoughts, backgrounds, and emotions. At Open House, each poem—with the first and last lines covered—can be placed on the student's desk. Parents are challenged to locate their child's seat by reading the poems. Later in the year, Biopoems can be used effectively to describe the traits of a character in a book or story. Omitting the first and last lines, students can guess which character is being portrayed.

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Poetry Theater

Poetry Theater helps students experience poetry and make it come alive through voice and movement. While reading aloud, students portray thoughts or emotions by adding voice emphasis—altering the pitch, delivery rate, and volume—and using facial expressions or body gestures. Costumes and props also are options.

To begin Poetry Theater, the teacher models reading a poem effectively and ineffectively (for example, too fast or slow, void of emotion or body movement). Students compare and contrast the readings. Students then select a short poem to practice for a class presentation.

In her study guide for teachers, Kathy Norris (2006) recommended the following steps for performing poetry with students:

1. Read through the poem silently.
2. Think about the narrator and characters.
3. Ask questions about what this character is feeling, what meaning the character is trying to get across, what the character looks and sounds like, and how the character moves (quickly, proudly).
4. Think about how to best portray this character—through voice, body, or facial expression.
5. Underline words to emphasize or write directives—such as *slow down*, *whisper*, or *stomp foot*—on a copy of the poem.
6. Prepare the presentation and practice it in front of others, being sure to look at different parts of the audience.
7. Record the poem and listen to it to see whether anything can be done to improve the presentation.
8. Videotape the presentation and reflect on possible ways to improve the delivery.

By providing students with experiences in Poetry Theater, they experience and enjoy another genre of literature while developing successful presentation strategies.

Alternative Book Reports

Some book report techniques are significantly more enjoyable, and better for meeting varied learning styles, than the traditional paper-and-pencil report. Try some of the following alternatives for book report assignments:

- **Travel Brochure.** Design a travel brochure about the book's setting. Using descriptive language, include specific details about the setting, as well as about the people (main characters) and their importance.
- **Poster.** Create a poster to advertise the book.
- **Next-Door Neighbor.** Select a character from the book and identify why this individual would or wouldn't make a good next-door neighbor.
- **Unpopular Position.** Choose a character from the book and defend why his or her role in the story should be different. Cite examples that make you feel this way.
- **Time Line.** Sequence, on a time line, the events of the book—up until the resolution of the conflict. Then split the time line horizontally, with the bottom half continuing the events according to the author's story. On the top half, develop an alternative resolution to the conflict and the resulting sequence of events.
- **Yearbook.** Create a yearbook for the main characters of the book. Include drawings of their faces, along with Name, Nickname, Clubs and Hobbies, Favorite Song, Most Likely to . . ., Favorite Saying, and Future Goals.
- **Song.** Find a song that tells a story similar to the one in the book. Write an essay that compares the meaning of the song with the book's purpose.
- **News Story.** Using the basic journalism techniques of who, what, when, where, how, and why, write a newspaper article about the book's characters, the conflict, and the resolution. As a variation, exaggerate the events of the book and write a tabloid article.
- **Picture Book.** Rewrite the story as a picture book for younger audiences.
- **Story Quilt.** Create a story quilt for the book. For each chapter, draw a picture on a square piece of construction paper that depicts events from that chapter. Include a one-sentence description. Sequence the events by pasting them on a larger sheet of paper to create a quilt pattern. Label the quilt border with the title of the book.

Closing **Thoughts**

Teachers should integrate activities that make learning meaningful, stimulating, and focused. Cognitive strategies will help students develop reading comprehension skills in an enriching, fun environment.

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